

ŚĀLABHAÑJIKĀ MOTIF IN SANSKRIT LITERATURE

*Avalambya gavākṣapārśvamanyā
śayitā cāpa-vibhagna-gātrayaṣṭiḥ /
vīrarāja vilambicāruhārā
racita toraṇa-śālabhañjikeva //*
Buddha-carita V, 52.

When the philosopher poet Aśvaghoṣa described the charming pose of a voluptuous beauty with the three-fold curves of her slender body standing under a tree while bending its branch by an up-lifted arm, little did he realize that the splendid motif was being best portrayed by this rhythmic verse itself. This well-known symbol (*śālabhañjakā*), occurring profusely in Sanskrit literature and Indian art was the gradual outcome of a historical background. It was also known as *sālahañjiyā* and *sālabhañjiyā*, the Pali equivalent of the Sanskrit word *śālabhañjikā*. This word is of frequent occurrence in ancient Indian literature right from the age of Pāṇini (fifth Century B.C.) to that of Rājaśekhara (early part of the tenth Century A.D.). This expression had become so deep-rooted that its derivation *śālabhañji* or *sālabhañji* continued to occur, off and on, in late medieval literature as well as in important contexts and glowing descriptions.

In the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini, the term *śālabhañjikā* connotes a type of favourite game of ladies in garden (*udyānakrīḍā*) in eastern India and also suggests a greater antiquity of this folk-tradition.

On such a joyous occasion, they used to bend the branches of the *śāla* trees, coming within the reach of their arms in some neighbouring grove, pluck their full-blown flowers and throw them on each-other in order to amuse themselves. Since the *śāla* trees were not to be found in Western India, no such game was prevalent there and this was why Pāṇini had designated it as *prācyā-kriḍā* of the women-folk (i.e. game of the ladies of the east).

Literally, the term *śālabhañjikā* means « a lady breaking a *śāla* tree » (*śālasya bhañjikā*), but no such separation of the compound into its component parts can be possible according to a rule of Pāṇini, which specifically recommends that the proper name of a game (*kriḍā*) or livelihood (*jīvikā*) is a case of constant aggregation (*nitya samāsa*) and hence any dissolution of it will remain precluded¹. While explaining this rule, the *Kāśikā* observes that the genitive (*ṣaṣṭhī*) becomes an eternal compound (*nitya samāsa*) in case of the proper name (*saṃjñā*) of a game (*kriḍā*) or livelihood (*jīvikā*) and therefore it will not be governed by the principle of breaking up (*vigraha*) of the constituent parts. Lacking this, it will fail to convey the desired meaning (*kriḍāyāṃ jīvikāyāṃ ca nityaṃ ṣaṣṭhī samasyate*)². The above rule of the grammar prevents us from interpreting the connotation *śālabhañjikā* (which is the name of a popular pastime sport of the age of Pāṇini) by dissoluting it into parts which will spoil its real sense i.e. bending of the branch of a *śāla* tree.

The Buddhist texts inform that once Māyādevī, the mother of the Buddha, expressed her keen desire to Śuddhodana to go to her father's city (Devadaha) to which he readily granted his permission. When the queen was on her way to Devadaha along with her retinue, she happened to see the Lumbinī grove full of *śāla* trees blooming with charming flowers and fruits from top to the bottom. She ordered for a brief pause and entered the auspicious grove with her female attendants for *śāla-kriḍā* (i.e. pastime game under *śāla* trees). At that time the Buddha was in her womb and had completed ten months of his stay there. The queen happened to reach a widespreading full-bloomed *śāla* tree and gracefully stood by its

1. *Nityaṃ kriḍājīvikayoḥ, Aṣṭādhyāyī*, Book II, Chapter II, 17.

2. VASU, ŚRĪŚA CHANDRA, *The Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini*, page 1167.

trunk with her readiness to sport under it. Surprisingly, the bough of the tree came within the reach of her hand of its own accord³.

When the queen clasped it and was standing cross-legged there, labour pain commenced in full and the Buddha was born miraculously there. Since he saw the light of the day under a *śāla* tree, while the queen was standing in *tribhaṅga* style (*akimbo*), the tree as well as the graceful pose was treated as auspicious by the Buddhists. The significant event resulted into the origin of a vivid and picturesque festival (*parva*) in a *śāla* grove which was celebrated to commemorate the great historical happening and is described as *Sālabhañjikā-parva* in the Buddhist literature. The festival is vividly described in the *Avadānaśataka* where we read that once when the Buddha was staying at Śrāvastī in the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika, on that very occasion the festival of *Sālabhañjikā* was being performed by the enthusiastic citizens with great rejoicings⁴. Many hundred thousand people had assembled there in the *śāla* grove in happy jubilant mood. Having collected flowers in great abundance, they busied themselves with playing, amusing and roaming hither and thither⁵. It was at this juncture that the daughter of the merchant Anāthapiṇḍikā entered Śrāvastī after having collected the *śāla* flowers in the garden⁶. This description suggests that the *Sālabhañjikāparva* which was marked by great rejoicings in the groves, had gradually evolved as a great major festival in the time of Gautama Buddha himself. In the art of Amaravati, we find representation of the *Sālabhañjikā* festival at Śrāvastī on which occasion the Buddha is depicted as surrounded by groups of gayful gents and ladies busy with rejoicings in a *śāla* grove⁷.

Gradually the game and festival went in to background and were replaced by the concept of a lovely art-motif, portraying a charming lady, bending the bough of a *śāla* tree and standing cross-legged under it. Its earliest carvings are to be found in Indian sculpture of the Maurya-Śuṅga-Sātavāhana Age. The motif had

3. *Lalitavistara*, page 61.

4. *Avadānaśatakam* (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts No. 79), page 134.

5. *Ibid*, page 134.

6. *Ibid*, page 134.

7. A. K. COOMARASWAMY, *Yakṣas*, Part I, Plate 21, Figure 6.

assumed two distinct forms of which one represented the nativity scene and was primarily sacred in character; and the other connoted a secular view in which a charming beauty scantily dressed stood cross-legged under a tree with its branch clasped by one of her arms. Some excellent representations of the nativity scene, which have been found in the art of Kauśāmbī, Nāgārjunīkoṇḍa and the Gāndhāra sculpture, tally well with literary account, throwing light on the circumstances of the amazing birth of the Buddha in the Lumbinī grove. The second form of the motif, mentioned as śālabhañjikā in early Indian literature, proved more popular and its excellent samples have been brought to light from the art of Sāñcī, Bhārḥūt, Kauśāmbī, Mehrauli and Amarāvātī, belonging to the Śuṅga-Sātavāhana Age (2nd Century B.C. to the 1st Century A.D.).

Mathurā and its suburbs have also revealed some masterpieces of the śālabhañjikā motif in the Buddhist art of the Kuṣāṇa period (1st Century A.D. to the 3rd Century A.D.). Its examples, which are preserved in Government Museum, Mathurā, Kaiserbagh Museum, Lucknow and National Museum, New Delhi, should be studied in proper perspective in relation to the earlier specimens of this motif. These śālabhañjikā models, representing sensuous beauties, were engraved on the rail-posts of the stūpas, and symbolize external allurements and worldly attractions, aversion to which had prompted the Buddha to renounce the pleasures of the palace. The water-bubble shaped cylindrical dome, containing the relics and the principal constituent member of the architectural complex of the stūpa dominating the entire area within the railing (*vedikā*), represents the momentary human life, transitoriness of the world and, above all, the inevitability of the death.

The śālabhañjikā motif gradually started becoming rare in the Gupta period for two underlying potent factors:

(1) The Mahāyānists regarded the status of the Tathāgata as above the concept of eternity and non-eternity (*nityānitya*), and, therefore, the representation of nativity scene found little response in the Mahāyāna art at this stage⁸.

8. *Saddharma Lañkāvatāra-sūtram* (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts No. 3), page 88.

(2) In the Hindu art of the age, the features of the motif, with additions and modifications, were stylistically replaced by anthropomorphic forms of the river-goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā, adorning both the ends of the lintels of the door-jambes (*dvāraśākhā*) of the temples and reminding us of almost similar positions occupied by the *śālabhañjikās* on the Buddhist *torāṇas*. In the changed form of the motif, the distinctive trait of bending the branch of the *śāla* went into oblivion because the tree, owing to its association with the event of the miraculous birth of the Buddha, was held as especially virtuous and also a symbol of mighty power by the Buddhists but not by the Hindus.

The term *śālabhañjikā* continued to occur in Sanskrit literature of the early medieval period (8th-9th Century A.D.) as well as late medieval period (10th-12th Century A.D.): e.g. the *Harṣacarita* and *Kādambarī* of Bāṇa, the *Viddha-śālabhañjikā* of Rājaśekhara, the *Āryā-saptaśatī* of Govardhanācārya and the *Naiṣadhiyacarita* of Śrīharṣa. The nomenclature of the *nāṭikā Viddha-śālabhañjikā* of Rājaśekhara and occurrence of the word *śālabhañjikā*, every now and then, in this text in relation to sculptured carvings, suggest that the term existed in popular literary usage in the time of the author who wrote it in the court of Yuvarājadeva (also mentioned as Keyūravarṣa and Vidyādharamalla⁹ in the work) at Tripurī on the basis of his first hand acquaintance with elegant reliefs carved on pillars and halls of the royal palace in the city, described as *Kelikailāsa* in the afore-said drama.

The *Prāṇapratīṣṭhā* and *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī* (being the two *ṭīkā*s of this popular drama of Rājaśekhara, written by Ghanaśyāma, the brilliant minister of Tukkoji I¹⁰ of Tanjor of the early part of the eighteenth Century A.D., with the help of his learned wives Sundarī and Kamalā)¹¹, while explaining the circumstances of preparation of its commentary¹², mention the word *śālabhañjikā*

9. *Viddha-śālabhañjikā*, *prāṇapratīṣṭhā*, Verse 17, page 7.

10. *Ibid.*, *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī*, Verse 18, page 6.

11. *Ibid.*, *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī*, Verse 22, page 7.

12. *Ibid.*, *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī*, VV. 19-20, page 7.

which evidently is a derivation of the term *śālabhañjikā*¹³. The *Viddha-śālabhañjikā* of Rājaśekhara and also the texts mentioned as above (i.e. the *Harṣacarita*, the *Kādambarī*, the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* and the *Āryāṣṭaśatī*) evince that the *śālabhañjikā* motif had considerably changed its form or rather the word had ceased to convey its original meaning in the post-Gupta period. In this phase of Indian history, which is to be noted for significant changes in many spheres of national life, the term *śālabhañjikā* simply connoted the statue of a charming damsel (*puttalī*) or, at times, the heroine (*nāyikā*) or the goddess of splendour (*Lakṣmī*) or, occasionally, a dancing beauty in a grove. The literary testimony of the period, extending from the 13th to the 18th Century A.D., also suggests that the expression *śālabhañjī* (equivalent to the word *śālabhañjikā*) merely denoted either the representation of a life-size or small female figure in stone, marble or bronze; or it meant the heroine or charming beauty figuring prominently in *kāvya* literature; and from medieval period onwards the very derivation of the technical term was either forgotten or ignored by literateurs.

13. *Ibid.*, *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī*, Verse 10, page 5.

Ibid., *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī*, Verse 34, page 9.

Ibid., *Camatkāra-taraṅgiṇī*, Verse 37, page 10. For further details, kindly consult my work *Śālabhañjikā*. (Allahabad 1979).